

If you dial 071-261 9342 today, or any other weekday, you can listen to the latest news items from the British government's least known propaganda unit. The London Radio Service (LRS) operates a "storacall" facility from the offices of the Central Office of Information (COI) in London and from British Information Services in New York. This allows radio journalists to record the bulletins down the line for use in their own news programmes.

The service is a semi-covert operation that produces its own news reports, features and interviews, including "zippy one- to one-and-a-half-minute reports with actuality", which it attempts to "place" in radio news programmes around the world. The reports have no copyright restrictions and are supplied free of cost. Often the COI provides (at a nominal cost) the technical capacity to receive its products down phone lines.

News and features are posted to British embassies and consulates on tape or, more directly, by telephone or satellite. They are provided in a variety of languages and the service is expanded "to reflect Foreign Office priorities". For example, the South American service was established at the time of the Falklands war and the Caribbean service in the aftermath of the invasion of Grenada by the US in 1984.

The service is run under the political direction of the information department of the Foreign Office. This department was formed from the remnants of the information research department (IRD) at the Foreign Office in the early 1980s.

The IRD, which was closed in 1977, was originally set up as a cold war propaganda unit in 1947 and had strong links with MI6. The IRD and MI6 set up a series of covert news agencies and radio operations in areas of postwar British intervention such as Suez, Palestine and Cyprus. The psychological warfare function of IRD, which also worked extensively in Northern Ireland, was officially stopped in 1977. However, the continued operation of the London Radio Service suggests that intelligence guidance still plays a part in overseas information policy.

Officially the Central Office of Information is supposed to provide a "balanced" view of Britain in overseas publicity, yet the main interviewees on the LRS are the Prime Minister, three senior ministers and the Northern Ireland Secretary. It is clear that government ministers are featured overwhelmingly, and there are few if any interviews with critics of the British government, or even with members of British opposition parties. According to sources in the COI, the LRS has developed from an old-style *Pathe News* type of propaganda outfit to become much more sophisticated. One LRS jour-

The London Radio Service is the Foreign Office's least known propaganda unit, supplying foreign stations with government "facts". **David Miller** tunes in

# Aerial combat

nalist said: "We're well away from propaganda to what I would call indirect propaganda... The whole point is that you can't... take the old approach by saying there's the good guys and the bad guys and the bad guys have to be shown as pretty nasty, bayoneting babies... Now you have to be totally impartial, while still pushing the line."

The most important target is the US, where a potential market of 10,000 radio stations is available. The government has expended considerable effort and resources trying to manage the news in

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the US. One of its highest PR priorities has been and remains the conflict in Northern Ireland. This was evident in attempts to counter the publicity generated by Gerry Adams on his recent US tour, where the London Radio Service distributed news items featuring ministers trying to play down the significance of Adams' visit.

Many radio stations are, say COI sources, unaware that the LRS is a British government operation. Economics also inhibits radio stations from inquiring too closely about the origins of "free" news. As one LRS journalist put it: "Radio is the Cinderella of broadcasting. If it's free they'll take it."

Most significantly, the COI tries to disguise the source of the news items that it places in radio bulletins. According to an official pamphlet outlining the service: "The distinguishing feature of COI radio as compared with other radio services is that material... is then broadcast by a station as if it were its own."

However, under the US Foreign Agents Registration Act, all publicity and propaganda material emanating from a "foreign principal" is required to be identified as such. All written or printed information distributed by British Information Services in New York features a standard form of words: "This material is prepared, edited, issued or circulated by British Information Services... registered under the Foreign Agents Registration Act as an agent of the British government." Yet the products of the London Radio Service are not so identified, nor are copies lodged with the US Department of Justice as required. This constitutes a criminal offence under US law.

It is not clear whether the US government will act to require the Foreign Office to label the London Radio Service, or if penalties will be imposed. If this did happen, the irony would be that one of the last covert propaganda operations run by the FCO will have effectively been closed down by the actions of one of Britain's closest allies. ■

David Miller's "Don't Mention the War: Northern Ireland, propaganda and the media" is now available, published by Pluto Press. He is lecturer in media studies at Stirling University

